

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Signing the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act

April 21, 2009

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you. Well, what an extraordinary day. It is good to be here with all of you.

I want to, first of all, thank President Bill Clinton for joining us here today—where's President Clinton?—[*applause*]—for his lifetime of service to our country, but also the fact that he created AmeriCorps, and that not only made this day possible, it has directly enlisted more than half a million Americans in service to their country, service that has touched the lives of millions more.

Now, it just so happens that one of those people who have been touched by AmeriCorps was FLOTUS, otherwise known as First Lady of the United States—[*laughter*]*—Michelle Obama, who ran a AmeriCorps-sponsored program, Public Allies, in Chicago.*

I also want to thank former First Lady Rosalynn Carter for being here—[*applause*]*—for her advocacy on behalf of those with mental illness, and for her husband's continued good works that inspire us all. I am thrilled to have Caroline Kennedy here—[applause]—for carrying on her family's long legacy of service.*

To my congressional colleagues who did such a fantastic job on a bipartisan basis ushering this through, starting with the two leaders of the House and the Senate, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, I'm grateful to them, and obviously, to Barbara Mikulski and Orrin Hatch, George Miller, the entire delegation who helped to shepherd this through. Please give them a huge round of applause.

To my outstanding Vice President, Joe Biden; to Dr. Jill Biden; a couple of outstanding public servants in their own right, please, a warm welcome for General Colin Powell and his wonderful wife, Alma; for the outstanding mayor of the New York City, Michael Bloomberg; and I've got to give some special props to my fellow Illinoisan, a great friend, Dick Durbin.

Finally, and I know that I've got some prepared remarks, but I just want to go ahead and say it now. There are very few people who have touched the life of this Nation in the same breadth and the same order of magnitude than the person who is seated right behind me. And so this is just an extraordinary day for him. And I am truly grateful and honored to call him a friend, a colleague, and one of the finest leaders we've ever had, Ted Kennedy.

All right. I want to thank the students and the faculty of the SEED School—[*applause*]*—our hosts for today, and their headmaster, Charles Adams. Where's Mr. Adams? Is he here? A shining example of how AmeriCorps alums go on to do great things. This school is a true success story, a place where for 4 of the last 5 years, every graduate from the SEED School was admitted to college, every graduate.*

It's a place where service is a core component of the curriculum. And just as the SEED School teaches reading and writing, arithmetic and athletics, it also prepares our young Americans to grow into active and engaged citizens. And what these students come to discover through service is that by befriending a senior citizen, or helping the homeless, or easing the suffering of others, they can find a sense of purpose and renew their commitment to this country that we love.

And that is the spirit in which we gather today, as I sign into law a bill that represents the boldest expansion of opportunities to serve our communities and our country since the creation of AmeriCorps, a piece of legislation named for a man who has not only touched countless lives, but who still sails against the wind, a man who's never stopped asking what he can do for his country, and that's Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

In my Address to a joint session of Congress in February, I asked for swift passage of this legislation, and these folks on the stage came through. So, again, I want to thank wide bipartisan majorities in the House and the Senate who came together to pass this bill, especially Barbara Mikulski, Mike Enzi, Chris Dodd, John McCain, who's not here, Thad Cochran, as well as, on the House side, Representatives Miller and Carolyn McCarthy, Buck McKeon and Howard Berman.

More than anyone else, the new era of service we enter in today has been made possible by the unlikely friendship between these two men, Orrin Hatch and Ted Kennedy. They may be the odd couple of the Senate. *[Laughter]* One is a conservative Republican from Utah; the other is, well, Ted Kennedy. *[Laughter]* But time and again, they placed partnership over partisanship to advance this Nation even in times when we were told that wasn't possible.

Senator Hatch was shaped by his experience as a young missionary serving others, a period he has called the greatest of his life. And last year he approached Senator Kennedy to share his ideas about service. Out of that conversation came this legislation. And last month, at Senator Hatch's selfless request, the Senate unanimously chose to name this bill after his dear friend, Ted. That's the kind of class act that Orrin Hatch is.

Now, Ted's story, and the story of his family, is known to all. It's a story of service. And it's also the story of America, of hard work and sacrifice of generation after generation, some called upon to give more than others, but each committed to the idea that we can make tomorrow better than today. I wouldn't be standing here today if not for the service of others or for the purpose that service gave my own life.

I've told this story before. When I moved to Chicago more than two decades ago to become a community organizer, I wasn't sure what was waiting for me there, but I had always been inspired by the stories of the civil rights movement, and President Kennedy's call to service, and I knew I wanted to do my part to advance the cause of justice and equality.

And it wasn't easy, but eventually, over time, working with leaders from all across these communities, we began to make a difference in neighborhoods that had been devastated by steel plants that had closed down and jobs that had dried up. We began to see a real impact in people's lives. And I came to realize I wasn't just helping people, I was receiving something in return, because through service I found a community that embraced me, citizenship that was meaningful, the direction that I had been seeking. I discovered how my own improbable story fit into the larger story of America.

It's the same spirit of service I've seen across this country. I've met countless people of all ages and walks of life who want nothing more than to do their part. I've seen a rising generation of young people work and volunteer and turn out in record numbers. They're a generation that came of age amidst the horrors of 9/11 and Katrina, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an economic crisis without precedent. And yet, despite all this—or more likely because of it—they've become a generation of activists possessed with that most American of ideas, that people who love their country can change it.

They're why the Peace Corps has three applications for every position available last year; why 35,000 young people applied for only 4,000 slots in Teach for America; why AmeriCorps has seen a 400-percent increase in applications in just the past 4 months. And yet, even as so many want to serve, even as so many are struggling, our economic crisis has forced our charities and non-for-profits to cut back.

What this legislation does, then, is to help harness this patriotism and connect deeds to needs. It creates opportunities to serve for students, seniors, and everyone in between. It supports innovation and strengthens the nonprofit sector. And it is just the beginning of a sustained, collaborative, and focused effort to involve our greatest resource, our citizens, in the work of remaking this Nation.

We're doing this because I've always believed that the answer to our challenges cannot come from government alone. Our Government can help to rebuild our economy and lift up our schools and reform health care systems and make sure our soldiers and veterans have everything they need, but we need Americans willing to mentor our eager young children, or care for the sick, or ease the strains of deployment on our military families.

And that's why this bill will expand AmeriCorps from 75,000 slots today to 250,000 in less than a decade. And it's not just for freshly minted college grads. As I said, my wife Michelle left her job at a law firm to be the founding director of an AmeriCorps program in Chicago that trains young people for careers in public service. And Michelle can tell you the transformation that occurred in her life as a consequence of being able to follow her passions, follow her dreams.

Programs like these are a force multiplier; they leverage small numbers of members into thousands of volunteers. And we will focus their service toward solving today's most pressing challenges: clean energy, energy efficiency, health care, education, economic opportunity, veterans, and military families.

We'll invest in ideas that help us meet our common challenges, no matter where those ideas come from. All across America, there are ideas that could benefit millions of Americans if only they were given a chance to take root and to grow, ideas like the one that Eric Adler and Raj Vinnakota had that led to this school and expanded its model to others.

That's why this bill includes a new Social Innovation Fund that will bring nonprofits and foundations and faith-based organizations and the private sector to the table with Government so that we can learn from one another's success stories. We'll invest in ideas that work, leverage private-sector dollars to encourage innovation, expand successful programs to scale and make them work in cities across America.

Because we must prepare our young Americans to grow into active citizens, this bill makes new investments in service learning. And we've increased the AmeriCorps education award and linked it to Pell grant award levels, another step toward our goal of ensuring that every American receives an affordable college education. Because millions of Americans are out of school and out of work, it creates an energy corps that will help people find useful work and gain skills in a growing industry of the future. Because our boomers are the most highly educated generation in history and our seniors live longer and more active lives than ever before, this bill offers new pathways to harness their talent and experience to serve others. And because this historic expansion of the Corporation for National and Community Service requires someone with both bold vision and responsible management experience, I have

chosen Mary [Maria]^{*} Eitel—where's Mary? There she is, stand up, Mary—as its new CEO. The founder and first president of the Nike Foundation, Maria is a smart and innovative thinker, and a leader who shares my belief in the power of service. And I also wanted to thank the Acting CEO, Nicky Goren—where's Nicky?—for guiding the corporation through this transition.

A week from tomorrow marks the 100th day of my administration. In those next 8 days, I ask every American to make an enduring commitment to serving your community and your country in whatever way you can. Visit whitehouse.gov to share your stories of service and success. And together, we will measure our progress not just in the number of hours served or volunteers mobilized, but in the impact our efforts have on the life of this Nation.

We're getting started right away. This afternoon, I'll be joined by President Clinton and Michelle and Joe Biden and Dr. Biden to plant trees in a park not far from here. It's as simple as that. All that's required on your part is a willingness to make a difference. And that is, after all, the beauty of service. Anybody can do it. You don't need to be a community organizer, or a Senator, or a Kennedy—[*laughter*]—or even a President to bring change to people's lives.

When Ted Kennedy makes this point, he also tells a story as elegantly simple as it is profound. An old man walking along a beach at dawn saw a young man pick up a starfish and throwing them out to sea. "Why are you doing that?" the old man inquired. The young man explained that the starfish had been stranded on the beach by a receding tide and would soon die in the daytime sun. "But the beach goes on for miles," the old man said. "And there are so many. How can your effort make any difference?" The young man looked at the starfish in his hand, and without hesitating, threw it to safety in the sea. He looked up at the old man, smiled, and said: "It will make a difference to that one." [*Laughter*]

To Ted, that's more than just a story. For even in the midst of his epic fights on the floor of the Senate to enact sweeping change, he's made a quiet trek to a school not far from the Capitol, week after week, year after year, without cameras or fanfare, to sit down and read with one solitary child.

Ted Kennedy is that young man who will not rest until we've made a difference in the life of every American. He walks down that beach, and he keeps on picking up starfish, tossing them into the sea. And as I sign this legislation, I want all Americans to take up that spirit of the man for whom this bill is named, of a President who sent us to the Moon, of a dreamer who always asked "Why not?," of a younger generation that carries the torch of a single family that has made an immeasurable difference in the lives of countless families.

We need your service right now, at this moment in history. I'm not going to tell you what your role should be; that's for you to discover. But I'm asking you to stand up and play your part. I'm asking you to help change history's course, put your shoulder up against the wheel. And if I—if you do, I promise you, your life will be richer, our country will be stronger, and someday, years from now, you may remember it as the moment when your own story and the American story converged, when they came together, and we met the challenges of our new century.

Thank you very much, everybody. I'm going to go sign this bill.

[*At this point, the President signed the bill.*]

^{*} White House correction.

All right, everybody, this bill has been signed.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:56 p.m. at the SEED school of Washington, DC. In his remarks, he referred to Caroline B. Kennedy, author and daughter of former President John F. Kennedy; former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell; and Eric Alder and Rajiv Vinnakota, cofounders and managing directors, SEED Foundation. H.R. 1388, approved April 21, was assigned Public Law No. 111–13.

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Names: Adams, Charles; Adler, Eric; Berman, Howard L.; Biden, Jill; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Bloomberg, Michael R.; Carter, James E., Jr.; Carter, Rosalynn; Clinton, William J.; Cochran, William T. "Thad"; Dodd, Christopher J.; Durbin, Richard J.; Eitel, Maria; Enzi, Michael B.; Goren, Nicola O.; Hatch, Orrin G.; Kennedy, Caroline B.; Kennedy, Edward M.; McCain, John; McCarthy, Carolyn; McKeon, Howard P. "Buck"; Mikulski, Barbara A.; Miller, George; Obama, Michelle; Pelosi, Nancy; Powell, Alma J.; Powell, Colin L.; Reid, Harry; Vinnakota, Rajiv.

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